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MEMORANDUMWEST GERMANY: AFGHAN CRISIS PUTS SCHMIDT ON THE DEFENSIVE

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Summary

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan has heightened security concerns in West Germany, setting off a new foreign policy debate that puts Chancellor Schmidt on the defensive. Government politicians fear a deterioration of detente during 1980--a development that could discredit the Ostpolitik and lead to defeat in the autumn election. Conservative Franz Josef Strauss, Schmidt's challenger, has so far been the beneficiary of this turn of events. Strauss is exploiting the situation skillfully--avoiding confrontational tactics that would reinforce his image as a cold warrior but subtly reminding voters that he has long questioned the government's assumptions about Soviet motives. Foreign policy is thus now playing a larger role in the election than seemed likely a few months ago. This issue in the campaign will be conditioned heavily by the German public's assessment, in late summer, of whether the Soviet action in Afghanistan leaves the Ostpolitik intact.

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A Key Debate

The Bundestag debate last month occasioned by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan provided an early look at how both sides are likely to treat foreign policy in the campaign. The opposition sought in the debate to challenge the government's lack of solidarity with the US. Schmidt's careful presentation, however, which declared solidarity with the US but featured a strong defense of the Ostpolitik, deprived the conservatives of a clear target. []

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Strauss' performance was the most noteworthy aspect of the debate. Contrary to his reputation for controversy, Strauss surprised everyone by adopting a nonpartisan stance and avoiding the tough polemics government politicians expect of him. Leaving that to Christian Democratic Union chairman Kohl, Strauss disarmed the government by proposing that it consult with the opposition on matters of "national responsibility" arising from the Soviet military thrust. Phrased this way, Strauss' offer was one the government could not refuse. []

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Fundamental differences about what constitutes a "realistic" Ostpolitik will not be reduced by these consultations. The talks, however, are likely to remove from the public arena at least one substantive issue raised by the Afghan crisis: whether the purview of NATO should be extended to the petroleum producing area of the Middle East. []

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NATO's Purview

Before the Bundestag debate, the opposition had urged publicly that the "geographical limits" of NATO be removed so that a strategic concept adequate to the new situation could be developed. Schmidt's Bundestag statement warned against "thoughtless speeches about geographical extension of the NATO commitment," saying it would not help the Third World but would create mistrust and harm the alliance. This view was not endorsed by Foreign Minister Genscher, however, who suggested that nonaligned states "even beyond Europe" consider NATO an element of their security. Although Genscher stopped short of accepting the opposition suggestion, he clearly found it worthy of examination. []

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The opposition speakers answered Schmidt's remarks about NATO by softly reaffirming their concept. CDU leader Kohl said the alliance must be viewed as having "worldwide significance," and Strauss observed that it might be appropriate to ask whether the definition of strategy adopted in 1949 applies to current military conditions. []

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Save The Ostpolitik

Schmidt's main presentation in the debate amounted to a skilful, tactical defense of government policy. In a carefully phrased declaration of solidarity with the US, he said Bonn would cooperate on sanctions against the Soviet Union approved by the European Community or COCOM. This was balanced by pleas for renewed efforts to improve "life together" for people in the "German states" and for continuation of arms control negotiations with the Soviets. []

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The opposition did not dispute Schmidt's points directly, nor question the legitimacy of the Ostpolitik treaties that Strauss called "poor but valid." Instead, Strauss and Kohl focused on the assessment of Soviet purpose perceived to underlie Ostpolitik, implying the government has misjudged the degree to which Moscow can be trusted. In this way, the opposition sought to appeal to resurgent German apprehensions about Soviet aggressiveness. []

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Stung by the implication it fails to grasp Soviet motives, the government tried to justify its policy of the past decade. Schmidt listed travel improvements between East and West Germany, asking, "Is this to be considered nothing?" Former Chancellor Willy Brandt said the reproach that "we fostered illusory hopes" is unfounded. Genscher insisted the government's approach to detente has been "realistic." []

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Solidarity With The US

The opposition is seeking to make West German solidarity with the US an issue, in part because it senses pressure on Schmidt from pro-Ostpolitik politicians and influential publicists who portray the US as incalculable and threatening to detente. This pressure was reflected in Schmidt's Bundestag speech, which endorsed the principle of solidarity with the US while stressing the need for coordination with European partners. []

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Kohl delivered the main opposition answer. He wondered how Germans would react if the US were to regard Soviet challenges to Berlin as "regional, involving primarily Germans." He declared opposition support for US measures against the USSR, urged they be long-term in nature, and asserted West Germany must not fill gaps resulting from American economic measures against Moscow. Schmidt's stress on European solidarity led Kohl to accuse him of having a "provincial" view of the Afghan crisis. Kohl ridiculed a public announcement by Schmidt that the Spanish Government shared his view of the Soviet military action and added, with reference to Schmidt's practice of coordinating with French President Giscard: "Everybody knows that the superpowers confront each other in the middle of Germany, whose partition differentiates us from states such as France, whose stance is not of significance for us in this matter." []

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While Strauss' own statement implied a need for solidarity with the US, he also saw US inaction as a factor in the enhanced Soviet strategic position. In addition, Strauss reinforced an unspoken government complaint by remarking that US counterstrategy to the Soviet Union is short-winded, hectic, and developed from one presidential election to the start of the next presidential campaign. [REDACTED]

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Outlook

The dispute about NATO's purview was the most substantial point of disagreement in the debate. While this issue will presumably cease to be a topic for public debate as a result of the consultations proposed by Strauss, the issue is nonetheless important. It reflects the opposition's desire, shared by the Schmidt government, to find a comprehensive, long-range response to the Soviet action to southwest Asia. Both sides assume West Germans want reassurance that their security will not continue to depend on improvised responses to unexpected Soviet moves. It is generally accepted in West Germany that the US responds that way, and the pro-Ostpolitik press is playing provocatively on the theme of US inconstancy. [REDACTED]

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Influential journals like Der Spiegel claim that Bonn's mission of rapprochement with Germans of the east is endangered by hasty cooperation with the incalculable US--a view that complements current Soviet pressure on European countries to defy Washington's "anti-detente" actions. The Schmidt government's equity in Ostpolitik is such that it cannot ignore these pressures. In the present political climate, however, Bonn dares not accede to them. Schmidt's interest is served by going along quietly with US responses to the Afghan crisis while avoiding the appearance of encouraging anti-Soviet sentiment in Western Europe. [REDACTED]

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The popular reaction against Soviet aggression gives the opposition's long-standing criticism of Ostpolitik greater resonance in West German politics. At the same time, Strauss must not seem to exacerbate strains in East-West relations or to take heart from a deterioration of ties with East Germany. Yet the opposition advantage that put the government on the defensive in the Bundestag debate depends, to a degree, on distant events that have again posed questions about the assumptions on which the Ostpolitik rests. [REDACTED]

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Strauss' Bundestag performance displayed understanding of the promises and perils of the new foreign policy situation. He gave a relatively nonpartisan lecture on strategy rather than a polemic against Ostpolitik, allowed Kohl to question government dedication to the alliance, and made the unexpected offer of national consultations on foreign policy that Schmidt could not refuse. This performance is bound to improve Strauss' standing as a candidate. But his chances in the contest with Schmidt will be heavily conditioned by the foreign policy outlook in late summer. That will depend on Soviet actions in Afghanistan and their repercussions in Europe rather than on the endless German dispute over Ostpolitik. [REDACTED]

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